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Author: Aisara Yessenova

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The Benefits of Blogging

AI SARA Y E S S E N O V A

Blogging is an unconventional way for students to hone their academic writing skills. Blogs are “a chronological publication in which personal thoughts and opinions are posted” (Lai & Chen, 2011, p. 948). The introduction of blog writing to the Advanced English course spurred the enhancement of students’ argumentative essay writing. This progress in developing one’s own sense of style and voice corresponds with the research findings by Warschauer (1997) and Montgomery (2015), who claim that the writing of student bloggers becomes more natural, reflective, and versatile.

Writing blogs, inserting one’s own opinions and suggestions, and sharing ideas with the readership make students’ writing precise and eloquent. The space limit and the format of blog posts require the authors to write in a laconic and engaging way. Bloggers therefore tailor their vocabulary to the needs of the audience. Montgomery (2015) mentions that by writing blogs students strive to be understandable and use the middle range of vocabulary: by doing so, they reach their own “native” writing style (p. 3). In fact, the readers are reluctant to spend time reading posts abundant with pretentious words. As a result, authors stop trying to sound sophisticated and shift to writing for comprehension.

Another example of progress relates to the quality of discourse. This process of choosing the topic cajoles students to be more critical in proving their arguments and interpretations, and responding to comments. Bayer (as cited in Warschauer, 1997) cogently argues that peer collaboration enables students to “make connections between new ideas and prior knowledge, develop language and thinking competences” (p. 471). Writing a post that encourages discussion is a constant way of contesting one’s ideas, reality and other people’s opinions. Choosing the subjects, writing-up the posts, and reflecting on the comments teach students how to be open-minded, thoughtful, and responsive. Once writers express their position, they rethink and reconsider their ideas in light of the readers’ feedback. This iterative process is a great opportunity to construct one’s comprehension of the complex events regarding another person’s viewpoint and experience.

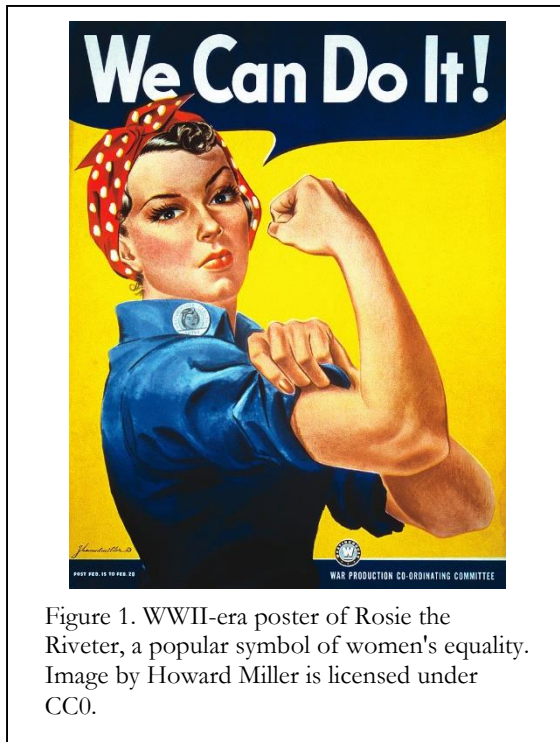
The unusual format of writing the blog posts also provides a space for creativity. In this light, students strive to be unique in the stream of other blog contributors. Bloggers can nurture creativity by practicing different sentence varieties, or as Warschauer (1997) emphasizes, “writing modes become more versatile” (p. 476) as the result of blog writing.

Writing blogs, according to the research presented here, can help polish students’ writing skills. The following examples of student blog posts can serve as evidence to prove this point. The first shows how a student is mastering her own diverse writing style while sharing insights into the topic of women leadership in academia (sample 1 below). Zere's first sentence is a great example of a complex sentence using parallel structure. The second post demonstrates how an author is developing a confident, honest, personal voice without hiding behind "pretentious" vocabulary (sample 2 below). Dilshat’s native style is evolving through posing questions to the readership and emphasizing words that capture the key address to the audience: inclusive education is about fostering people’s capacities. The third clearly demonstrates the benefit of reflection in writing, both for the author and the audience (sample 3 below). Zhuldyzay is reflecting on her data collection process, teasing out the lessons she gained for the future, but also providing some guidance for readers embarking on qualitative interview-based research themselves. As seen, while following one format of space-limited blog writing, student bloggers managed to take advantage of blog writing in a very personalized and unique way.

Women Leadership in Education

Zere Kussainova

<https://nuwritersguild.wordpress.com/2015/01/15/women-leadership-in-education/>



Thanks to Dr. Sparks, our cohort of Higher Education managed to explore, understand and think about women leaders in education: who they are, what their roles are in education and in society as well. It was a very significant and interesting topic for us because we were eager to know the inside of this “absorbing” term as we study in the major called “Educational Leadership”. In addition, the interest grew since there are only women in the group. My goal here is to share with you, Master’s students of Educational Leadership, ideas discussed in our class and to see what you think about this, if possible.

Personally, a woman leader is the woman who effectively juggles both career and family, who achieves success in the work and value family life. However, there is another idea of the authors which can be very interesting.

To explore this topic we went through several stages or steps: we discussed, read and gave PowerPoint presentations. We read a book chapter written by Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011), who stated that there is a need to redefine or to create new understanding of leadership as women leadership in

education. Women leadership in education is different from other types of leadership such as transformative, managerial...and, therefore a new definition should emerge which will totally fit to the qualities, differences, traits and peculiarities of women leaders. And there are a number of reasons to prove that: women perceive and use power differently than men; they use power through understanding and listening. As was said: “Women have modeled ways to use power and make change through understanding, a process that requires listening, not just talking” (p. 91). Then, what makes women leadership unique is the use of skills given them naturally as a part of being a woman, which are mothering skills (protection, support, encouragement, etc.), and which can be beneficial in educational leadership. However, there was time, when “mothering skills were perceived less important than leadership” (p. 84). Moreover, women’s “revolutionary” approach to improve something and to change things for the better, to help others, to improve social justice are estimated as a certain difference. “As a way of making meaning in their work of leadership, women discuss their desire to make things better, to right social wrong, to increase support for underserved groups” (p. 90).

To sum up, women leadership is a phenomenon which can be understood by people differently. How to achieve success in education being a woman is a difficult question and maybe there is no sole answer that fits for all and is common for all because nowadays we are open to everything, we have freedom, and we have the right to be different. So, what does women leadership mean to you, and does it exist in Kazakhstan?

Who is Really Disabled? The Importance of Transforming People’s Mindset Towards Inclusivity

Dilshat Kalshabek

<https://nuwritersguild.wordpress.com/2016/02/06/who-is-really-disabled/>

Recently, I was facebooking and came up with an interesting post of one of the friends of mine about his visit to the center for physically disabled people. In his post he wrote about a girl who shared her life story and thoughts about it. I was really touched and, eventually, was inspired to write about it. The original story was written in Kazakh. I will do my best not to change the message translating the story.

It was a hot summer. My mother and I were at a doctor and after medical check we were given the list of medicines that we had to buy. Then on the way to the drugstore I have noticed that some people were looking at me sitting on wheelchair with a great sympathy, others were passing with pride and arrogance. Then I thought looking at them: "If I were able to walk like these people would I treat the same as they do?" Most likely it will be otherwise. We reached the drugstore and my mother left me outside and entered there.

I was sitting and moving my wheelchair. The sun was shining brightly, flowers smelled fragrantly. Suddenly, a woman passing by came up and was trying to find some money in her pocket. "I don't need your money," I said with anger and with pain questioned myself: "Do I look so helpless and pitiful?" "I am not a beggar, I don't need your money," repeated I and another man came up and said: "Better give me that money, to the beggar like me." The man looked slovenly and he smelled of alcohol. The woman gave him the money and went along.

Coming back home I started to speculate about those people who can see, hear and walk on their own but they became beggars and continue to harm their health. Whereas people like me who can't even make a step on their own still striving and trying to become as everyone else.

Who is really disabled then?

The issue raised in this life story is vital. It has a direct relation to the inclusion in education which is considered as a right but difficult way to choose. Different stakeholders have different perspectives and most of them are skeptical about it. The first and foremost precondition for inclusive education to become successfully implemented is people's readiness to accept those "unusual" people as they are. That is to say, to create inclusive society. It is social values and perception which determine whether to include or exclude a specific characteristic of an individual. As the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) report defines:

"Social inclusion of the excluded groups can only happen if everyone becomes "part of the group" that defines the culture, values and standards of the society in which they live." (p. 32)

Labeling them as people with special needs or the Russian equivalent, "люди с ограниченными возможностями" (people with limited opportunities), we define and affect people's attitude towards them. Actually, we are all with limited opportunities. This is a result of social identity, meaning a person's self-conception is derived from the group they were categorized to. As a rule, people want to possess a positive identity where they are valued and respected. Otherwise, the society where there is an imbalance between the individual's power may end up with the process of *social exclusion* (UNDESA, 2009). To achieve the social inclusion it is necessary to change the meaning and values associated with unfavorable characteristics.

This can be achieved by raising people's awareness with the help of the education system, mass media and social campaigns. People have to realize that inclusive education doesn't necessarily mean studying with disabled people. Instead, inclusive education is aiming to find and focus on what a student *can do*. It is clear from this point that every child regardless of his/her level of capacity is going to benefit from the education which is inclusive. Undoubtedly, it is not an easy task to make people "embrace" people who are excluded from the first attempts. In this case, media and social campaigns are going to become important stakeholders in this essential but challenging process.

Going back to the story, it is possible to draw a conclusion that these people do want us approach them better and want to become a part of the community which is called "Humankind".

P.S. Food For Thought:

If you fail to see potential in the person but only see person's disability, then who is blind?

If you cannot hear your brother's cry for help and justice, then who is deaf?

If you cannot stand up for the right of all people, then who is cripple?

If you cannot have the patience, the tolerance and understanding for individual differences, then who is mentally handicapped?



Figure 2. Alternative International Symbol of Access, which attempts to change social perceptions of disability. Image by Brian Glenney and Sara Hendren is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0. Retrieved from accessibleicon.org

I am a Researcher...!

Zhuldyzay Zhakypbekova

<https://nuwritersguild.wordpress.com/2015/11/12/i-am-a-researcher/>

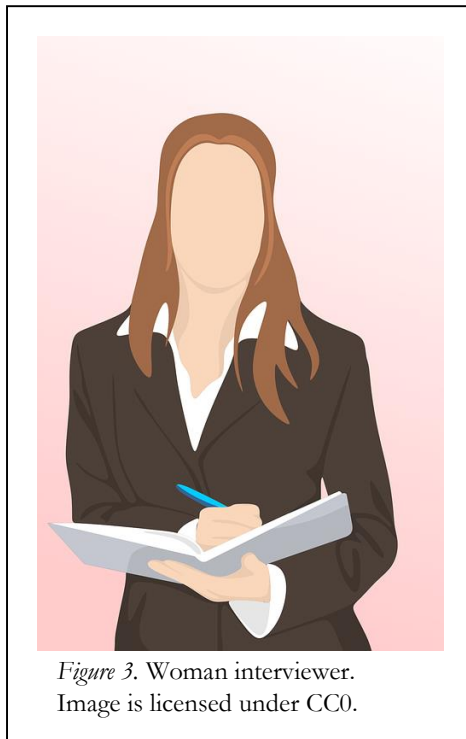


Figure 3. Woman interviewer.
Image is licensed under CC0.

I would like to share my first experience of conducting mini research to study the teaching and learning challenges in online education. I have chosen two volunteer teachers who are striving to make online education widespread in our secondary school. However, they claim that they face challenges working online and much effort should be done to achieve their goals. I interviewed them and experienced the difficulties myself too.

The first difficulty I faced was the development of interview questions. I spent hours on thinking how to construct the questions so that they helped me to answer my research questions and sub-questions. Moreover, it was challenging to avoid biased and leading questions.

The pre-interview period was followed by the interview process itself. Probably, because it was my first experience as a researcher the first thing I forgot was to record the interview. When I realized the absence of the tape recorder I started to take notes spontaneously. But it was a lesson for me, and I prepared the tools in advance for the second interview.

One more weakness of my first interview was that I informed the interviewees about the confidentiality and ethical issues in the end of the interview. In addition, I made an agreement about the interview a few

days ahead; however, we couldn't meet at the set time. Despite the fact that I had a good proximity to the research site it was not always possible to meet with interviewees. The reason for this was that teachers were overloaded with school work.

Although I had different challenges during the interviews, there were advantageous moments. The interviews provided me the opportunity to investigate the main phenomena from different perspectives. I had a chance to ask follow-up questions which helped me to understand teachers' attitudes and experiences in detail.

Summing up, it was a challenging but learning experience for me at the same time. I could feel myself as a real researcher. Also, I understood the important aspects of the data collection process which I need to consider further.

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